

Deborah Sims BSc (Hons) MSc CEng FCIHT

CASE STUDY

My name is Deborah Sims and I am a senior lecturer in the Department of Civil Engineering at the University of Greenwich. I specialise in highway design, safety engineering and project management and also have the responsibility for industrial liaison and marketing of the department to students, employers and other external agencies.

I haven't always worked in academia; I actually started my career in local government, working for a number of London boroughs, a district council and a county council as a road safety engineering and highway designer, before moving into the private sector in 1997. I then worked for two engineering consultancies, the first working on local authority roads and the second on strategic roads.

It was during my time at one of these consultancies that I started to seriously consider my professional engineering status. Although my first degree was in civil engineering, I had chosen to specialise in highway design and road safety which, at the time, the Institution of Civil Engineers did not recognise as demonstrating the requirements for Chartered Engineer (CEng). I therefore decided to study for a Masters degree in road safety engineering and, at the same time, I became an active member of the Chartered Institution of Highways and Transportation (CIHT).

My involvement with the Institution was to prove invaluable as several years later, the Institution gained its own licence to award Chartered and Incorporated status which allowed engineers who had specialised in road safety and highway engineering to become professionally qualified. By working closely with the membership team I gained the necessary knowledge and understanding of the registration process and learnt how best to demonstrate how I had met the competences required for registration as a CEng, as stated in the Engineering Council's UK Standard for Professional Engineering Competence (UK-SPEC).

Whilst studying, I also began giving technical talks and presentations to students and was invited to become a visiting professor at the University of Ulster. I was later able to draw on this experience to demonstrate my communication skills and commitment to the engineering profession, one of the five core competency areas within UK-SPEC.



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Once I had completed my MSc, I began to work on my application for CEng. Although my employer was very supportive, I elected to do most of the work in my own time; this was after all, my personal journey. As the application involved a presentation, I was able to use a work based assignment as the focus, however, as I was in a management position at the time, I chose to submit a bid project for which I had been project manager rather than a technical project. Although this was a slightly unusual approach, I was able to map my learning and experience to the competences within UK-SPEC very successfully, demonstrating that a traditional technical project is not essential for a successful CEng application.

When I applied for my current role, one of the essential requirements of the applicant was that he/she was a CEng, as the university has always been very keen to increase the number of professionally qualified staff. For me, as a lecturer, it is important to demonstrate professional competence to colleagues and students; it also helps when working with engineering professionals from industry. Professional registration shows a commitment to one's own technical specialism and to the wider engineering profession.

Through their institution, academics can develop a professional network which can be invaluable for advancing and testing new programmes, providing industrial experience to students as well as supporting continuing professional development and knowledge sharing.

In terms of promoting registration to students, I would encourage them to identify a suitable professional body and apply for student membership, which for many institutions is free. My other advice would be to try to get involved with their local branch activities, at a national level if they can. This looks great on a CV and starts to develop their professional network, which will help with getting a job and moving on in their future career.

Additionally, students should read the technical journals produced by their institution, and try to engage as widely as possible within engineering in its broadest terms. Some students seem to focus on a very narrow specialist field at a very early stage and this can be detrimental to their overall development and career progression. Having joined a professional body they must maintain a clear focus on their long term career goals and personal development objectives. Finally, students must remember that getting a good degree is only part of the journey.

So what about my personal development objectives? Now I have moved into academia my short term goal is to attain a post graduate certificate in higher education and after that a PhD. I want to continue in my role as a professional reviewer for CIHT and in mentoring and supporting potential IEng and CEng candidates. I plan to develop new programmes for the department of civil engineering and work with colleagues to bring real life industry experience into the learning environment for all our students. I am also passionate about encouraging more girls and women into engineering as I believe it offers a range of rewarding and interesting careers.

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